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MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

NOTES

9/11 politics play a role

The war in Iraq has put U.S. jazz musicians in an awkward position as they ply their trade internationally. After a period of silence following 9/11, they're beginning to speak out.

"We're Americans," Reid Anderson of The Bad Plus solemnly announced the other night at the Spectrum. "The three of us, and millions of Americans, are ashamed of what's going on. ... I think it's important for us to speak out and say there's a lot of good people in America – the world knows what's right, and things are going to change." Then they launched into The Empire Strikes Backwards.

Two hours later, wacky New York trumpeter-bandleader Steven Bernstein, noted at the Genii: "You know, we're from the United States of America – do you have any oil?" And later: "I mean, George Bush as our leader - I am ashamed!"

"You feel you have to say something, but you don't quite know what," top trumpeter Dave Douglas said before his show this Saturday. As jazz musicians they represent the best of American culture, but reality can bite.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Speaking of the nihilistically named band, The Bad Plus in fact comprises three freewheeling Midwesterners who have made an art of approaching jazz from multiple points of view. They are probably best known for doing rock covers, and their initial numbers at the Spectrum Monday had something like power-trio wattage. But pianist Ethan Iverson soon went off on virtuoso benders in search of Rachmaninoff. Reid Anderson (the personable spokesman) nodded exuberantly on bass while David King kept himself busy (and happy) on drums, sometimes picking up a rattle or other noisemaker. By excluding guitar, trumpet or saxophone, the Bad have situated themselves on a clean and elevated terrain, equidistant from jazz, rock and classical. They can bring things down to a dirge or lift them to a hootenanny. They are a joyous, joyous group. Bad, my ass.

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS

Gonzalo Rubalcaba didn't have far to go to catch up with Cuban compatriots after his Place des Arts show last week. Oumundo Cabado, percussionist for Grand Orchestra Cubana de Montreal, led the pianist to Cubano's, the upstairs club next to the Spectrum that's hosting a different Cuban band every night of the festival. Word got out. Cubans came in, the wine and beer flowed, and Rubalcaba tore down the house playing rolling rhumbas with a band called Cobeba.

Wynton Marsalis was all smiles walking up Jeanne Mance St. two hours before his opening night show. That was before he suffered a split lip backstage, leading to the concert's cancellation. It was to have been taped by Blue Note records for a DVD, and pricey equipment and personnel were hired at a hefty fee. Doctors tried to find a way for him to play, but feared a career-threatening infection.

J. B.

Giving jazz traditions new life in the context of a crackerjack nonet with an irreverent avant edge is what Steven Bernstein's Millennial Territory Orchestra is all about. Just don't call this fun-loving, virtuosic, sometimes thrilling agglomeration a band, though, as he pointed out to the unseen announcer who made the mistake Monday the Genii.

Playing the rare slide trumpet Bernstein drove his great ensemble with passion and skill through New Orleans, Kirt, 1940s swing, a la Dickie Wells. Drummer Ben Perowsky and bassist Ben Allison were outstanding in giving thrust and shape to the group sound, while violinist Claude Barham, using a wah-wah peddle, and saxophonists Peter Apfelbaum and Erik Lawrence were top soloists.

IRWIN BLOCK

Café Republique, in festival heartland at St. Urbain and Ste. Catherine Sts., has embraced the entrepreneurial spirit of the event with daily specials named after jazz fest deities. Yesterday's was a Thorogoodburger, all dressed, extra guacomole.

JOHN GRIFFIN

Zachary Richard at Théâtre du Nouveau Monde

ALLEN MCINNIS THE GAZETTE

The multi-talented Richard Zachary performs last night at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde. He performs again tonight and tomorrow at the same venue at 8 p.m. For ticket information, go to www.montrealjazzfest.com or call (514) 871-1881.

For Three Guitars Larry Coryell, John Abercrombie and Badi Assad switch off their amplifiers and turn on their unplugged personas

High-voltage acoustic

BERNARD PERUSSE
THE GAZETTE

You have to give Larry Coryell credit. The guitarist seduced a generation of boomers into liking jazz by incorporating flashy rock during his 1970s tenure with early-fusion group Eleventh House, and could have had an easy career as a speed-merchant hack. Instead, he picked up an acoustic guitar and reacquainted himself with the instrument in its purity.

Some 30 years after staking out that second path, the give-and-take between the unplugged and the high voltage continues in Coryell's life. His latest CD, the heavily-amped Tricycles, teams him with bassist Mark Egan and Paul Wertico. Last year, however, he formed a trio of a different nature, the all-acoustic Three Guitars, with John Abercrombie and Badi Assad. A disc of the same title followed. The three will bring that project to the Spectrum tonight.

"Although I still attempt and admire virtuosity, I really am much more interested in playing more melody, along with the regular pyrotechnics that I like to play from time to time. And, frankly, it's been great working with John, because I think he and I are influencing each other quite subtly," Coryell said.

Abercrombie, who has collaborated with Chico Hamilton, Billy Cobham, Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland, among others, also switched off his amplifier for this without-a-net project, and the mutual influence Coryell spoke of is all over the disc. "John really likes a lot of space, and he doesn't like to play a lot of notes. He's very gentle," Coryell said. "I have a tendency to want to be fiery and flashy, and it's not good taste just to go off and play in the style I used to play during the Eleventh House days in this Three Guitars context. It's much more subtle and much more gentle. We have to be careful because of the three different chemistries that need to intertwine. There's a lot of listening that goes on, a lot of saving space (and) using space."

COURTESY OF DISTRIBUTION FUSION

Larry Coryell of Three Guitars: "I really am much more interested in playing more melody."

The third ingredient is Brazil's Assad, largely known for her classical guitar work – but also for her guitar, body and vocal percussion. "We've been playing every night for the last month, and she's just getting more and more comfortable in her role as the 'non-improvisatory' member of the group," Coryell said. He said he has worked on some improvisations with Assad, who might "reveal" some of them tonight.

The delicate balance between the three different approaches is helped by Coryell's own empathy with his two partners. "We do listen carefully to each other," he said. "With John, I have a particular connection based on jazz and improvisation and bebop and lots of chord changes, obviously. With Badi, I have a connection based on my experience with Brazilian music, which is more based on the Brazilian harmonic style, which is different from jazz. (It's) based on a lot of rhythm and a lot of techniques that are unique to Brazilian guitar."

It's a far cry from the ear-punishing overdrive of the early days, probably as Coryell likes it. When asked about whether the "jazz-rock fusion" label has become an albatross for him, the good-natured musician had no complaints. "I mainly try to stay out of any kind of self-analysis vis-à-vis my relationship to the market," he said. "I'm just working on my next composition and trying to become a better musician.

"I've had great teachers in the course of my life. I just try to follow the wisdom of my teachers. Wayne Shorter taught me that. He told me one time, point blank to my face, jazz means 'no category.'"

Three Guitars, featuring Larry Coryell, Badi Assad and John Abercrombie, at the Spectrum tonight at 9:30. Tickets cost $34.50. Go to www.ticketpro.ca or call (514) 908-9090.

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REVIEWS

Backing players steal scene

AT THE SPECTRUM

Fortunately, Galbán, López let them shine

Much was expected of Manuel Galbán as he strapped on his Fender Telecaster for his appearance with Buena Vista Social Club bassist Orlando (Cachaito) López at the Spectrum last night. Looking like a rockabilly legend, every inch the doo-wop king he was with Los Zafiros in Havana in the 1960s – albeit an aging one – the Grammy-winning guitarist didn't so much disappoint as stay way in the background.

While there were a few tantalizing samples of his reverb-heavy surf-guitar sound, particularly on the Perez Prado standard Patricia, Galbán mostly contented himself with strumming rhythm behind the authoritative upright-slapping of López and the hurricane-force band.

The 10 musicians backing the two headliners were the real story last night. Early in the concert, the pair pretty much gave the band proxy to run the entire show, and the furious, breathless soloing never let go during the two-hour selection of Afro-Latin grooves, burning jazz, cheesy cha-chas, pulsating sons and danzons – and even Stevie Wonderish keyboard funk.

Particularly impressive was pianist Roberto Fonseca, who played both electric and standard piano – at times simultaneously. His dizzying work on En el Comienzo made the internalsion that followed a necessity for both band and listeners.

And where do you start with the six-man brass section that blew with such abandon, trading break-neck solos when they weren't carrying the melody? Hearing tenor sax player Jimmy Jeske and trumpet player Youre Munzi shred Lenny Despacio halfway into the second set was only one of the evening's highlights.

The players, clearly pleased with themselves, exchanged hugs, handshakes and high-fives throughout the performance. Talk about well deserved.

BERNARD PERUSSE

Urban Tap stutters

Monotony dashes high hopes

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Tap dancing was a lively street-level spinoff of the early jazz tradition, strangely ignored in today's multi-beats scene, so last night's Urban Tap concert by Tamango (Van Cayzeele) at Théâtre Maisonneuve promised to be a treat. The dancer made quite a charming splash in a four-night stint at last year's festival, and the presence of master saxophonist David Murray whetted the appetite for an inspired two-fer-do.

Last year, Tamango came across as a witty and personable fellow, sharing the stage with a female dancer for luscious bolly counterpoint and with computerized video screenings adding a decidedly urban touch. This year's show, dominated by percussionists from Haiti and Brazil, had very little "urbanity" about it. Instead, the relentless beats seemed to serve only as a backdrop for tap-as-calisthenics. The speed of his taps was awesome – particularly in moon-walk mode – but much of it was monotonous, lacking in variety (like last year).

There was precious little real interaction with Murray. As for the great tenor saxophonist and bass clarinetist, I wish I could report on his performance. However, sitting in the sixth row and virtually 10 metres from him, much of the time it was impossible to hear Murray with any clarity, buried in the sound mix bouncing around the theatre. Such is life at Place des Arts. Imagine how I'd feel if I had actually paid for this prime seat.

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